The Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF) of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth

Skills Development.

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BACKGROUND

TQF Management Committee (TQFMC)

The TQFMC, comprising expert representatives from regions, was elected by the representatives of various senior officials of Ministries of Education who participated in a VUSSC TQF meeting in 2008, with a view to developing and ensuring the smooth implementation of the TQF in the 32 Small States. The elected members were: (i) Africa & The Mediterranean: Franz Gertze (Nambia) and Kaylash Allgoo (Mauritius); (ii) The Caribbean: Michael Bradshaw (Trinidad & Tobago) and Yvonnette Marshall (Jamaica) and (iii) Asia and Pacific: Richard Wah (Fiji) and Abdul Waheed (Maldives). The TQFMC elected its own chair and two vice chairs in the persons of Mr. Kaylash Allgoo as Chairperson and Mr Michael Bradshaw and Dr. Richard Wah as Vice-Chairperson respectively. In pursuance with the terms of reference of TQFMC, the persons were elected to office for an initial period of three years whilst a permanent administrator was appointed by COL. The Committee cooperates with the VUSSC Management Committee and the Chairman is ex-officio of the Management Committee of the VUSSC Initiative. (VUSSC Concept Document May 2008)

Some of the objectives of the TQFMC are:

1. To oversee the development and implementation of the TQF, including the development of concepts, policies, and guidelines.
2. To oversee the evaluation of programmes to be registered on the VUSSC TQF.
3. To report on a regular basis (but at least annually) to Ministers of Small States of the Commonwealth through COL on all matters related to the TQF.
4. To communicate and advocate the TQF within Small States of the Commonwealth.
5. To recommend the appointment of external observers, technical experts and external evaluators to COL when required.
6. To develop and maintain appropriate strategic networks to enhance the objectives and performance of the TQF.

Governance and Funding

The TQF is conceptualised as a translation instrument existing only as a virtual entity. In this context, a delegated governance model that relies on collaboration with sectoral, national and regional quality – assurance agencies has been set up.

Four aspects of the governance of the TQF are:

i.   The small virtual sub-committee (Secretariat) within the broader VUSSC;

ii.   Group of interlocutors to provide an oversight function;

iii. A web portal, located within the VUSSC and COL infrastructure;

iv.   Allocation of seed money for at least the first three years.

The broad development objective of VUSSC focuses on human resource capacity development through working with partner institutions to produce and deliver relevant courses using e-Learning strategies that are scalable and sustainable. VUSSC now involves all 32 Commonwealth Small States and the Social Transformation Programmes Division (STPD) of the Commonwealth Secretariat (ComSec) provides some funding through its Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation (CFTC). (VUSSC Concept Document May 2008) COL plays a facilitating role in relation to the VUSSC.

In addition, COL and ComSec will also focus on the following key activities listed in COL's 2009-2012 TYP, namely:

a)   Capacity development for Open Distance Learning (ODL) in the development and delivery of courses;

b)   Networking Ministries and National Institutions to manage the VUSSC;

c)   Strengthening of Quality Systems through its Transnational Qualifications Framework.

The National Qualifications Framework (NQF)

The emergence of the knowledge based economy model has prompted the need for a unified system which would cater for the requirements of education and training systems and would allow for the portability of learning across the world. NQFs seemed to respond to those needs and since 1995; three generations of NQF have been set up. So far, only about 50 % of the 32 Small States own or are in the process of implementing a National Qualifications Framework. A time based categorisation of the NQF as at 2006 can be seen at Table 1.

1st Generation (NQFs) Implemented in 1995	2nd Generation (NQFs) Implemented in the late 1990's, early 2000	3rd Generation (NQFs) Currently under consideration
Australia, England, New Zealand, Scotland and South Africa Wales and Northern Ireland,	Ireland, Malaysia, Mauritius, Mexico, Namibia, Singapore, Trinidad and Tobago	Angola, Barbados, Botswana, Brazil, Caribbean (regional), Chilli, China, Colombia, Democratic Republic of Congo, EU (Regional), France, Jamaica, Lesotho, Macedonia, Malawi, Mozambique, Philippines, Pacific Islands (Regional), SADC(regional), Slovenia, Tanzania, Turkey, Uganda, Uzbekistan, Zambia, Zimbabwe

Table 1: Time-based categorization of the NQFs
(Source: SAQA Bulletin Sept 2006 Vol 9 No. 2)

Small States were however not fully represented within those three generations of NQFs and the VUSSC expects that the TQF will initially be available to 32 member States of the Commonwealth, representing millions of prospective students, and then gradually provide rooms for more Small States inclusive of those that form part of the Small Islands Developing States (SIDS).

The Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF)

The TQF is not intended to replace any existing qualifications frameworks or quality assurance systems which exist in any of the 32 Small States. It rather provides a means by which the different existing frameworks can be compared and related. The TQF is a unified qualifications framework that includes both higher education qualifications and technical and vocational qualifications offered through the VUSSC. (See Table 2 below) Each NQF needs to relate to the TQF levels so that the translation can be facilitated across all countries. One way to do this is through a NQF where each NQF level corresponds to a level on the TQF.

LEVEL	QUALIFICATIONS TITLES	MINIMUM CREDITS
10	Doctoral Degree	360
9	Masters Degree	240
8	Postgraduate Certificate and Diploma; Bachelors Degree with honours	120
7	Bachelors Degree; Graduate Certificate and Diploma	360
6	Advanced/ Higher Diploma Associate Degree/ Foundation Degree	240
5	Diploma	240
4	Advanced Certificate	120
3	Certificate III	40
2	Certificate II	40
1	Certificate I	40

Table 2: The Transnational Qualifications Framework

Architecture and Structure of the TQF

The TQF is a ten (10) level qualifications framework and this is premised on the fact that most of the member states have or are developing NQFs with ten levels. The key mechanism of this ten level framework is backed by Quality Assurance Guidelines, Qualifications Guidelines, Level Descriptors, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and the maintenance of the VUSSC portal.

The VUSSC TQF qualifications will form a subset of qualifications already registered elsewhere. Guidelines for different qualification types, credits and translation criteria have also been established, while credit transfer is right now still outstanding; level descriptors in relation to the TQF refer to the statements describing the characteristics of the generic outcomes of each of the ten (10) levels in the TQF. Characteristics consist of the knowledge, skills/competencies and attributes that participants should possess or be able to demonstrate on completion of a programme/course/module.

Additionally, the TQF intends to build on the existing VUSSC electronic infrastructure, and the TQF portal will consist of a searchable database of registered qualifications (offered through the VUSSC) including details as registration on the TQF (level, credits, etc.), as well as details relating to the

possible registration of the qualification on another qualifications framework; a searchable database of education and training providers that have been accredited (by sectoral, national and regional qualifications agencies) to offer TQF registered qualifications; and an interactive site, in the form of a Wiki, where agencies and providers can participate in informal discussions of TQF procedures and guidelines.

REFERENCING THE TQF

Despite the differences among countries, there appear to be some elements common to all NQFs. They all have reference levels describing types of skill and knowledge in various qualifications, quality assurance principles and guidelines, and methods for recognising learning gained in different programmes and contexts.

The core of the TQF are ten reference levels describing what a learner knows, understands and is able to do – 'learning outcomes'. Levels of national qualifications will be placed at one of the reference levels, ranging from basic (Level 1) to advanced (Level 10). It will therefore enable much easier comparison between national qualifications and should also mean that people do not have to repeat learning if they move to another country. An illustration using the Mauritian NQF is shown in Table 3 below.

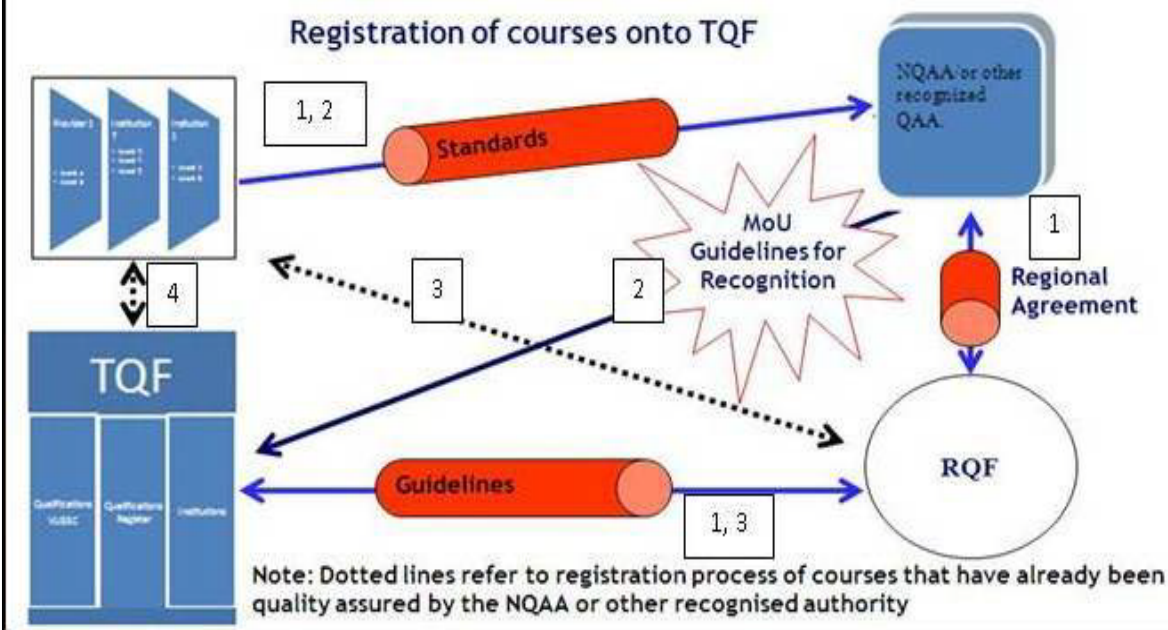| Transnational Qualifications Framework				Mauritian NQF	
TQF Level	Qualification Titles	Minimum Credits of TQF	Hrs of TQF	Qualification Titles	NQF Level
10	Doctoral Degree	360	3600	Doctorate	10
9	Masters Degree	240	2400	Masters Degrees, e.g. MA, MSc, MPhil Postgraduate Diploma Postgraduate Certificate	9
8	Postgraduate Certificate and Diploma; Bachelors Degree with honours	120	1200	Bachelor's Degree with Honours, Conversion Programme	8
7	Bachelors Degree Graduate Certificate and Diploma;	360	3600	Bachelor Ordinary Degree	7
6	Advanced/ Higher Diploma Associate Degree/ Foundation Degree	240	2400	Diploma	6
5	Diploma	240	2400	Certificate	5
4	Advanced Certificate	120	1200	Certificate	4
3	Certificate III	40	400	Certificate	3
2	Certificate II	40	400	Certificate	2
1	Certificate I	40	400	Certificate	1

Table 3: Referencing the TQF

Additionally, the TQF could be used for harmonization with Regional Qualifications Framework (RQF) and can hence be used as an instrument for the Education and Training system in all commonwealth countries and ultimately as an overarching Human Resource Development Strategy within regional grouping of countries. Harmonization will then imply access to reliable and transparent information, greater networking between all stakeholders in higher education, and the sharing of resources and models of good practices, with a view to promoting greater inter-regional mobility. (VUSSC Concept Document May 2008)

Registration of a Qualification on the TQF

Registration of a local qualification on the TQF is multi-dimensional. Figure 1 gives a pictorial description of how a course can be registered on the TQF.

The VUSSC Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF)

Registration of courses onto TQF

Note: Dotted lines refer to registration process of courses that have already been quality assured by the NQAA or other recognised authority

Case 1: Country with a National or recognised local Quality Assurance Agency and falling within a Regional Qualifications agreement

Individuals Training Institutions running programmes meeting the national standards set by the National or recognised local Quality Assurance Agency would be required to have their programmes accredited by the local agency as a mandatory condition. These agencies, through their regional agreement, would then accredit the said programme on the RQF, which based on the guidelines set up by the TQF, would then be able to apply for registration of those qualifications on the TQF and same will be available for all 32 Small States of the Commonwealth. This represents path1 in Figure 1.

Case 2: Country with a National or recognised local Quality Assurance Agency but without any Regional Qualifications agreement

Individuals Training Institutions running programmes meeting the national standards set by the National or recognised local Quality Assurance Agency would be required to have their programmes accredited by the local agency as a mandatory condition. These agencies, through their signed Memorandum of Understanding would then be allowed to pitch those qualifications on the TQF and same will be available for all 32 Small States of the Commonwealth. This represents path2 in Figure 1.

Case 3: Country without a National or recognised local Quality Assurance Agency but with a Regional Qualifications agreement

Individuals Training Institutions running programmes meeting the standards set by Regional Qualifications / Quality Assurance Agency have their programmes accredited on the said regional Framework. Thereafter, based on the guidelines set up by the TQF, these qualifications would be pitched on the TQF and same will be available for all 32 Small States of the Commonwealth. This represents path3 in Figure 1.

Case 4: Training Institutions applying directly to pitch qualifications on the TQF

In a forth instance, a training institution having its programmes already accredited by local / Regional Quality Assurance Agency, will be given the possibility to seek registration of their qualifications

directly to TQF. However, in the event of such an application, the TQF Secretariat will enquire on the status of the accreditation of the said programme with the local / Regional Agencies before proceeding with its registration on the TQF.

BENEFITS OF THE VUSSC TQF

Currently in small states, there exist many people who have broad experience in their field and yet do not possess any qualifications. Through RPL, these persons can acquire a recognised qualification in their country. RPL can also be one access route to further learning and inclusion on the TQF programmes for those learners who do not possess relevant qualifications to enter the programme and if same is also pitched on the TQF, they then also have a means to have their qualifications recognised in another country and eventually even practice their craft in a different country. RPL has officially been launched since June 2009 in Mauritius in 9 sectors and works are in progress for launching of the same in various other countries like Ghana, Tanzania, Namibia or Botswana.

Youth unemployment is a global challenge that needs to be faced. In fact, COL figures point at staggering number of youth entering the labour market each year in several countries. Hence, 45% of the world's young people are without work, many of them young women, live in the Asia and Pacific regions. In Africa, the challenge is to find productive employment for 7 to 10 million new entrants to the labour market every year. In Kenya and Tanzania, for example, the annual number of young people joining the labour forces is respectively 500,000 and 700,000. 80% of jobs worldwide require technical and vocational skills, yet skills training are 14 times more expensive than general secondary education in Sub-Saharan Africa. (Commonwealth of Learning)

TQF will be a highway for youth to develop skills and acquire techniques for a healthy livelihood. Hence, students will have access to a greater number, variety and quality assured programmes/courses that are co-branded by the VUSSC. Moreover, it will facilitate mobility of learners throughout the participating countries through credit transfer within the Small States, while also facilitating the portability of courses and recognition of qualifications amongst countries. Furthermore, international benchmarking by TQF will lead to improved competitiveness and standards of national education and training providers, while promoting capacity building using South-South cooperation as most of the Small States face similar challenges. Additionally, Small States meeting the transnational qualifications criteria will be registered on the TQF portal and such a qualification will be referred to as a "TQF registered qualification". (VUSSC Concept Document May 2008)

CONCLUSION

The UNESCO / Council of Europe Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education (2001) categorizes transnational education in terms of collaborative and non-collaborative agreements, where collaborative arrangements include franchising, twinning and joint degrees where study programmes, parts of course of study or other educational services of the awarding institutions are provided by a partner in another country. Non-collaborative arrangements, on the other hand, include branch campuses, offshore institutions, corporate and international institutions, where study programmes, parts of a course of study or other educational services are provided directly by an awarding institution in one country to another country or countries. (African Union) Transnational education can be delivered in a variety of forms: through distance learning (using printed, electronic, audio and video-based media) and face-to-face. Today, the TQF reflects the philosophy of UNESCO.

The next phase is the implementation of the TQF by the various member States. It is to be pointed out that adherence to the TQF is voluntary and would not replace the respective existing local framework. In fact, the COL and the TQMFC both look forward to the implementation of the TQF with a view to drawing parallels between existing qualification frameworks, while providing a means for member states to provide and have access to a number of online courses, which will, moreover, be mutually recognized by the different States.

The TQF is meant to enhance transnational education and training system as well promoting education for all. Small States and Small Islands share the same belief in the transformation of the system of education and training. They focus on building their man power and the transnational

qualifications framework provides small states with a translation instrument which will allow comparability with many large countries.

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